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The CIA: Does It Do What We Think It Does?

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Perhaps no area of our government having a direct bearing on our attitude in the cold war has been more controversial, yet less understood than our intelligence network.

It is partly that we don't know what the Central Intelligence Agency does, but if it does what we think it does, it goes against our sense of fair play and that is bad.

The popular notion is that the CIA is a law unto itself. It is believed that it freely interferes in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, and that it overthrows anti-American governments, even democratically elected ones, to install anti-Communist governments.

Some writers have capitalized on these beliefs, shadowed them with a cloak and fastened them with a dagger and written books to support them. Fortunately, most were crudely written and rudely received.

Still, many congressmen and some journalists continue to ask, why have an intelligence community at all? Mostly the questioners are those to whom "intelligence" connotes spies, saboteurs and political activists.

Those living in the intelligence community consider the question absurd. But it deserves an answer.

Any president of a large corporation, and, indeed, any chief of state, must have "intelligence" if he is to fulfill his responsibilities.

He may get it from newspapers, from briefings by his subordinates or from reports from consultants. Wherever, he must have intelligence, in both senses of the word; or he will not survive long.

Before World War II, the armed services had relied heavily upon civilian specialists in wars and, when the fighting was over, they sent the specialists home and forget all about the need for intelligence.

Gen. George C. Marshall once described the Army's foreign intelligence as "little more than what a military

attache could learn at a dinner, more or less, over the coffee cups."

Five months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Harry Howe Ransom reports in "The Intelligence Establishment," President Roosevelt summoned Col. (later Maj. Gen.) William J. Donovan to draft a plan for a new intelligence service designed for the requirements of a global war and patterned in the main after the British.

Donovan was a successful lawyer who had won the Medal of Honor in World War I.

"He was an imaginative, aggressive man," Ransom writes, "who had traveled abroad extensively. So far as intelligence work went, he was an amateur, but in the American tradition of public service he seemed qualified to assemble what was to become the forerunner of CIA."

During World War II the closest approach to a central intelligence system was the widely publicized Office of Strategic Services—the almost legendary OSS.

It is difficult to assess the worth of OSS because its official history still remains classified. Still, it must be given credit, despite traditional detractors, for invaluable contributions to Allied victory, especially in Burma and in defeating the Axis in North Africa and in aiding the French resistance movement in France.

But it wasn't until 1947 that Congress created the CIA. It was fashioned after OSS and it was born during the year that cold war was declared.

Actually, Congress in setting up CIA delegated it a single function, intelligence, and nothing more. That it does much more is without question, but just what and where it does it is hard to say.

There is a theory among intelligence agents, the good ones; that there should "almost always" be no failures. It is better, so the theory goes, to leave a

problem unsolved than to risk failure or discovery.

Still, there have been failures: The Bay of Pigs, the U2 incident.

Taking into account CIA's policy toward supercaution, it would seem reasonable to assume that for every failure there must have been, oh, ten or more successes.

The failures have been pinned on the CIA while the successes almost never are. Not definitely.

Some have suspected the CIA of having brought on the downfall of Nkrumah in Ghana and Sukarno in Indonesia, of having installed the military junta in Greece and of having thrown Sihanouk out of Cambodia.

But these credits, if they are, do nothing more than support the notions of observers who see the CIA as a mold-er of temporary geography and a shaper of tentative history.

It is the same attitude which Miles Copeland III, who once worked for the State Department and the CIA, writes to in his "The Game of Nations."

"In the intelligence game, competitors seek to gain the greatest possible advantage short of going to war."

Yet, the primary function of the CIA continues to be to coordinate the whole intelligence system, consisting of some 10 or 12 separate services, to ensure as Allen Dulles said:

"That it gives our government's top policy makers exactly the information they need, no more and no less, in order to make the right decisions."

Simple information, raw data, may be good or bad, accurate or inaccurate, relevant or irrelevant, timely or dated.

But "intelligence" is information that has been evaluated, correlated, boiled down to a workable size and placed in reports which can be quickly and easily read.

The chief job of CIA is to supervise this process. No one who understands anything about the demands of management can question the need for a agency to handle the job. Few do, or at least should, question that that agency must be the CIA.